

# Indian trade through Jewish *geniza* letters (1000–1300)

**Ranabir Chakravarti**

Professor of History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

---

*The letters of Jewish merchants from West Asia and North Africa found in Cairo shed considerable light on the trade and traders engaged in commerce across the Indian Ocean in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This article also considers the social environment in which the traders lived and dealt with each other.*

---

**Keywords:** *Geniza*, ben Yiju, pepper, Aden

During the first half of the second millennium AD the Indian Ocean emerged as a vast trading zone stretching from its western termini like Siraf/Basra/Baghdad in the Persian Gulf zone and Alexandria/Fustat (old Cairo) in the Red Sea area to the eastern ports in Southeast Asia and China. The South Asian subcontinent stood almost at the very centre of the Indian Ocean where shipping and navigation were largely determined by the monsoon system.<sup>1</sup> In view of the emergence of what K.N. Chaudhuri labels ‘emporium trade’ and ‘segmented voyages’ in the Indian Ocean at the turn of the eleventh century,<sup>2</sup> the ports on the two sea-boards of the subcontinent, began to loom large as suitable providers of points of transshipment, gateways and sojourning, in addition to their direct participation in commercial exchanges. It is surprising that out of the protracted past of India’s involvement in the Indian Ocean maritime trade, only two phases, namely the first three centuries and the centuries from 1500 to 1800, generally attract the attention of historians, respectively for the study of the Roman trade and the impact of trade and politics under European powers in the second half of the second millennium. The most worked-out phase in the Indian Ocean history is, indeed, the 1500–1800 period which witnessed major transformations with the advent of North Atlantic powers and trading companies.<sup>3</sup> The first half of the second

---

<sup>1</sup> Ranabir Chakravarti, ‘Merchants, Merchandise and Merchantmen in the Western Sea-board of India: A Maritime Profile (c. 500 BCE–1500 CE)’, in *The Trading World of the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800*, ed. Om Prakash, New Delhi, 2012, pp. 53–116, particularly 78–110.

<sup>2</sup> K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Ashin Das Gupta and M.N. Pearson (eds), *India and the Indian Ocean 1500–1800*, Calcutta, 1987; K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe, Economy and Civilization in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge, 1990.

---

***Studies in People’s History*, 2, 1 (2015): 27–40**

SAGE Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC

DOI: 10.1177/2348448915574366

millennium often receives marginal attention from maritime historians of the Indian Ocean. The present article takes a close look at the maritime trade of India, especially along its western sea-board in the light of business letters of Jewish merchants who frequently visited ports and marts on the western sea-board of India during the period 1000–1300. Fascinating images of a wide variety of merchants, commodities, shipping, ports, the dangers of sea travel, social and cultural practices of merchants and exchange of information among them appear from these trade letters.

Recovered from a Jewish synagogue in Old Cairo (Egypt), these letters (celebrated as *geniza* letters of ‘India traders’), of voyaging Jewish merchants ‘give us some rare quantifiable data on maritime commerce’, thanks to the dedicated research of S.D. Goitein and his colleagues. The word *geniza* is derived from the Persian term *ganj* meaning ‘store’. In the Cairo *geniza* were stored as enormous number of old letters, partnership documents, court documents and other legal papers which the Jews used to deposit there since the Jewish custom required the proper disposal of any paper bearing the name of God in the *geniza* of the synagogue. The *geniza* in the Cairo synagogue is now completely empty as all the letters, documents and other papers have been taken out and are now preserved in various museums and library collections in various countries.<sup>4</sup> These documents primarily relate to the trade in the Mediterranean zone, embracing Spain, North Africa, Egypt, Sicily and the Levant.<sup>5</sup> However, there are about 459 letters of Jewish merchants involved in the maritime trade in the Indian Ocean and India itself.<sup>6</sup> The most striking point here is that these letters bear the voice of the merchants themselves and their various concerns, including the problems and prospects in their commercial ventures, the exchange of information, so crucially linked with the transactions in commodities at distant places.<sup>7</sup> Many business letters also deal with partnerships

<sup>4</sup> Stefan C. Reif, *Cairo Genizah: A Mosaic of Life*, Jerusalem, 1997; Stefan C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of the Cambridge University Genizah Collection*, Richmond, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> The best account of life in the Cairo *geniza* documents is provided in S.D. Goitein’s monumental *A Mediterranean Society*, in six volumes, Berkeley, 1967–1990. Some specimens of the India traders’ letters are also to be found in S.D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, Princeton, 1973. Also see Shaul Shaked, *A Tentative Bibliography of Geniza Documents*, Paris, 1964.

<sup>6</sup> S.D. Goitein and Mordechai Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza ('India Book')*, Leiden, 2008. This is the most important source for understanding the activities of the Jewish India traders. All references to *geniza* letters in this article, unless stated otherwise, are from this source, its title abbreviated to *India Book*.

<sup>7</sup> There are many stories of merchants’ seafaring activities in Buddhist and Jaina literature and also in Somadeva’s *Kathasaritsagara*. But it is difficult to find the actual activities of merchants from these stories. Another collection of seafaring tales is Buzurg ibn Shahriyār’s *Kitāb ‘Ajāib ul Hind*, transl. G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, London, 1980. In the vast Arabic and Persian literature on geography, some information of seafaring is also available. S. Maqbul Ahmed (tr.), *India and Its Neighbouring Territories by al Idrisi*, Leiden, 1960; S. Maqbul Ahmed, transl., *Arabic Classical Accounts of India and China by Sulaiman and ibn Khordadbeh*, Shimla, 1989. The celebrated travel accounts of Marco Polo (transl. H. Yule and H. Cordier, 2 vols., London, 1903), and Ibn Battuta (transl. H.A.R. Gibb, London, 1929)

or *commenda* among merchants as these were essential in view of the inevitable high risks in the long-distance trade. The risks related not only to uncertainties of markets and financial returns, but also to the frequent dangers encountered in sea voyages. While many of the letters communicate strictly business matters, these also contain non-formal and personal pieces of communications among merchants.

A large number of the Jewish merchants hailed from Tunisia and reached Fustat or Old Cairo, the political centre of the Fatimid Caliphate of Egypt. From there the merchants travelled for voyages along the Red Sea from the Egyptian port of Qus or Aydhab. A major hub of Jewish trading operations was Aden, the major port in Yemen; and from Aden the sea-borne journeys to the west coast of India began. The return journey from India to Aden and beyond followed the same route. Of crucial importance was the maritime network of the Red Sea, the *bahr-i-qulzum* of Arab accounts. After a relative relegation to the background during the three centuries, 700–1000, the Red Sea network became vibrant from the late tenth century, thanks to the emergence of the Fatimid Caliphate. The Red Sea further offered linkages with the Mediterranean through Egypt which acted as a hinge between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. In the southernmost segment of the Red Sea, Aden, served as a major hub for Jewish ‘India traders’ who plied either between Misr (Egypt) and Yemen or between Aden and the western Indian sea-board, or went from Misr to India via Aden. This required the regular presence of a representative of Jewish merchants (*wakīl ut tujjār*) in Aden, who figures very prominently and regularly in the *geniza* documents.<sup>8</sup> Apart from Aden, Aydhab on the western shore of the Red Sea actively participated in the maritime trade of the western Indian Ocean.<sup>9</sup> Aydhab further offered linkages for Mecca and Madina, the holiest of Islamic centres, especially for the Hajj pilgrims.

These preliminaries may help us appreciate the letters under review. The itinerant spirit of the Jewish merchants is well captured in the following quote: ‘One who is present can see what is not seen by one who is absent’. This was what Joseph b. Abraham wrote from Aden to Abraham ben Yiju in Malabar with the request

---

are also important sources on ships and individuals crossing the sea. The concrete epigraphic evidence of various Tamil merchants’ groups, especially the Ainnurruvar, venturing to Sri Lanka, maritime Southeast Asia and also China, reveals actual seafaring by individual and/or group of merchants. See Noboru Karashima, ed., *Ancient and Medieval Commercial Activities in the Indian Ocean: Testimony of Inscriptions and Ceramic Sherds*, Tokyo, 2002; also Ranabir Chakravarti, ‘An Enchanting Seascape: Through an Epigraphic Lens’, *Studies in History*, XX, 2004, pp. 305–15.

<sup>8</sup> For Aden see Roxani Elleni Maragariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port*, Chapel Hill, 2007; also G. Rex Smith, *Studies in the Medieval History of Yemen and South Arabia*, Aldershot, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> The importance of Qus and Aidhab is discussed by Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, I. In some *geniza* letters Aydhab figures also as Adhab; Ibn Jubayr, the late twelfth-century Andalusian traveller passed through Aydhab in order to reach Mecca. See *Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, transl. R.J.C. Broadhurst, London, 1954.

to purchase for him some Indian commodities,<sup>10</sup> since, being on the spot, ben Yiju was the appropriate person to judge which commodities would be commercially most viable.<sup>11</sup>

Among many Jewish Indian traders two figure quite frequently in the records. They are Madmun b. Hasan-Japheth, a Jewish merchant in Aden (also the representative of the Adanese Jewish merchants) and Abraham b. Yiju. Ben Yiju was a Tunisian Jew who came to Egypt from Maghreb; from Egypt he came to India via Aden. He spent nearly two decades (1132–49) in Malabar, particularly at al Manjarur or Mangalore<sup>12</sup> where he built a bronze factory. During this stay ben Yiju married a local Tulu lady, Ashu, who was originally his slave woman, and bore him three children. In 1149 ben Yiju returned to Cairo once again via Aden.<sup>13</sup>

A salient feature of the *geniza* letters is the information on ship-owning merchants, usually bearing the epithet *nākhudā* (Persian for ‘ship master’). The letters are replete with mentions of Jewish, Muslim and Indian ship-owners who were rich traders. Many of the ship-owners themselves took to the sea.<sup>14</sup> There are, besides, other types of merchants whose itinerant nature is borne out by their very names. Thus the name Joseph al Adani al Mamsawi demonstrates that he had originally hailed from Mamsa in Morocco, but resided in Aden. Similarly, the representative of Jewish merchants at Fustat or Old Cairo, Abu Zikri Cohen had a suffix, Sijilmasi, implying that he came from Sijilmasa in Morocco. The name Hiba al Hamwi, another India trader, speaks of his connections with Hama in Syria.

## II

The commodities handled by these India traders, the core subject of their correspondence, make interesting reading. A regular item shipped from India was betel nut. In a letter of 1130 Madmun b. Japheth confirmed the receipt of 2000 white and red betel nuts at Aden, sent by Abraham b. Yiju.<sup>15</sup> In a letter sent from Aden by Joseph Abraham to ben Yiju (dated 1134–37) the sender requested ben

<sup>10</sup> *India Book*, p. 575.

<sup>11</sup> Goitein perceptively remarked that ‘the India trade was the backbone of medieval international economy’ (*India Book*, XXI, pp. 135–59, 223–49).

<sup>12</sup> A letter of 1132 to ben Yiju speaks of “the city of Manjarur which is in the land of India in Tuluva of Malibarat, the royal city...on the shores of the great sea’ (*India Book*, p. 55). Malibarat is clearly Malabar; and Tuluva is, of course, the Tulu-speaking district around that port.

<sup>13</sup> For Ben Yiju see the fascinating work of Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 153–62, 174–78, 174–88.

<sup>14</sup> The term *nākhudā*, from *nāu-khudā*, literally, ship master, could mean the ship’s captain as well as the ship-owner. See, Ranabir Chakravarti, ‘Nakhuda and Nauvittakas: Ship-owning Merchants in the West Coast of India (c. AD 1000–1500)’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient (JESHO)*, XLIII, 2000, pp. 34–64.

<sup>15</sup> *India Book*, p. 313.

Yiju to buy betel nuts.<sup>16</sup> In another letter of 1137–40 Joseph Abraham informed ben Yiju that he had received at Aden the consignment of betel nuts sent from India. Then he added:

Please do not send me any more red betel nuts, for they are not good. If there are to be had white fresh betel nuts, it will be all right.<sup>17</sup>

First, this clearly demonstrates the steady demand of Indian betel nuts in Aden—evidently a bulk agrarian/plant product, possibly of two varieties—the red and the white. Another letter of 1139, written from Aden by Khalaf b. Isaac, records the receipt of betel nuts sent by ben Yiju who was further requested to send a fresh supply to Aden.<sup>18</sup> The Arabic word *faufal* seems to have been derived from the Sanskrit term *pugaphala*, denoting betel nuts: the word commonly figures in inscriptions of Konkan and Karnataka during the early medieval times. That the Konkan and Canarese coasts regularly yielded betel nuts is unmistakably borne out by inscriptions of the Silaharas.<sup>19</sup> Ali b. Mansur *al Fawfali* ('betel-nut dealer') was a Muslim merchant residing somewhere on the west coast. He appears in many *geniza* papers as a ship-owner or a *nākhudā*. He must have had with him enough financial resources, derived from his handling of betel nuts, that enabled him to undertake the shipping business.

Among agricultural/plant products exported from India, cardamom appears occasionally. From correspondence between Madmun and b. Yiju (1130s) we learn about the receipt of a shipment of cardamom at Aden; Madmun now urged ben Yiju to forward fresh consignments of cardamom to Aden on the first available boat.<sup>20</sup> On another occasion Joseph Abraham requested ben Yiju to send him cardamom to Aden in case adequate supply of the betel nut could not be ensured.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Khalaf b. Isaac, a close business associate of Madmun at Aden, communicated to ben Yiju the receipt of a supply of cardamom.<sup>22</sup> A sack of cardamom of one *bahar* (about 300 pounds or 150 kg) and 222 pounds fetched the total price of 83½ *dīnār* (in terms of the Maliki *dīnār* of Aden), the unit price being 48 *dīnārs* per *bahar* of cardamom. Another sack of cardamom, containing 2 *bahars*, less 7 pounds (that is 593 pounds), was sold at the rate of 45 *dīnārs* per *bahar* of cardamom, thus setting the total price at 89 *dīnārs*.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 567.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 557.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 608–609.

<sup>19</sup> The regular plantation of betel nuts as a bulk agrarian commodity is discussed by Ranabir Chakravarti, 'Exchanges of Agrarian Products at Locality Levels and Beyond (c. 500–1300)', in *Excursus in History, Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma*, ed. K.M. Shrimali (in press).

<sup>20</sup> *India Book*, p. 314.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 567.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 608–609.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 343.

The place of pride among exported spices/plant products from India undoubtedly went to pepper for which Kerala/Malabar has been famous through the ages.<sup>24</sup> The *geniza* papers are replete with references to trade in the Malabari pepper. In one letter Madmun reported to ben Yiju that proceeds from the sale of pepper at Aden had amounted to 510½ *dīnārs*. The importance of this imported spice is driven home by the fact that Madmun paid at the customs house of Aden the sum of 155⅓ *dīnārs* as a tithe on the sale of pepper. This information was communicated to ben Yiju as his business accounts were settled.<sup>25</sup> In another instance Madmun wrote to ben Yiju about the rather dull market for pepper at Aden; he, however, saw some improvement of the situation on the eve of the sailing season to Egypt from Aden, and the price of pepper rose to 23 *dīnārs* per *bahar*.<sup>26</sup> This is clear testimony to Egypt and the Mediterranean having been the final destination of imported pepper, which was routed through Aden, where also there was a steady demand of this spice.

In another of Madmun's letters, datable to 1130s, the price of the pepper was quoted at 34 *dīnārs* per *bahar*—clearly a price higher than the one figuring in the letter above.<sup>27</sup> As the pepper sold well in Aden, Madmun urged—through ben Yiju—four other merchants, Sus Siti, Kinbati, Isha and Ishaq, to expedite the shipping of the pepper from India, hinting also that these merchants had not been very active.<sup>28</sup> These are clearly local Malabari merchants supplying the pepper from the pepper-producing area to the ports for export. The name Sus Siti, as suggested by Ghosh, stood possibly for Seshu Setti.<sup>29</sup> Madmun urged ben Yiju in this letter to see that any ship sailing from al Manjarur or Mangalore carried a substantial supply of pepper for the Adanese market. Madmun's close associate Khalaaf b. Isaac too sent him a separate request to buy pepper for him to be sold at Aden and/or forwarded further afar to Mediterranean destinations.<sup>30</sup> In the correspondence of Joseph Lebdi, a prominent Jewish India trader, the arrival is recorded of 80 bales of pepper at Aydhah from Nahrwara (Anhilwara, Gujarat). The pepper reaching Aydhah was clearly meant for shipment for ports further west. More interestingly, the pepper seems to have been first transported from Malabar to Gujarat, which did not itself produce pepper.<sup>31</sup> The letters often tell us in whose ships the

<sup>24</sup> The demand for the Kerala pepper in the Mediterranean markets goes back to late first century BC and it continued unabated till the mid-eighteenth century.

<sup>25</sup> *India Book*, pp. 343–44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 342–43.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 320, 322.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

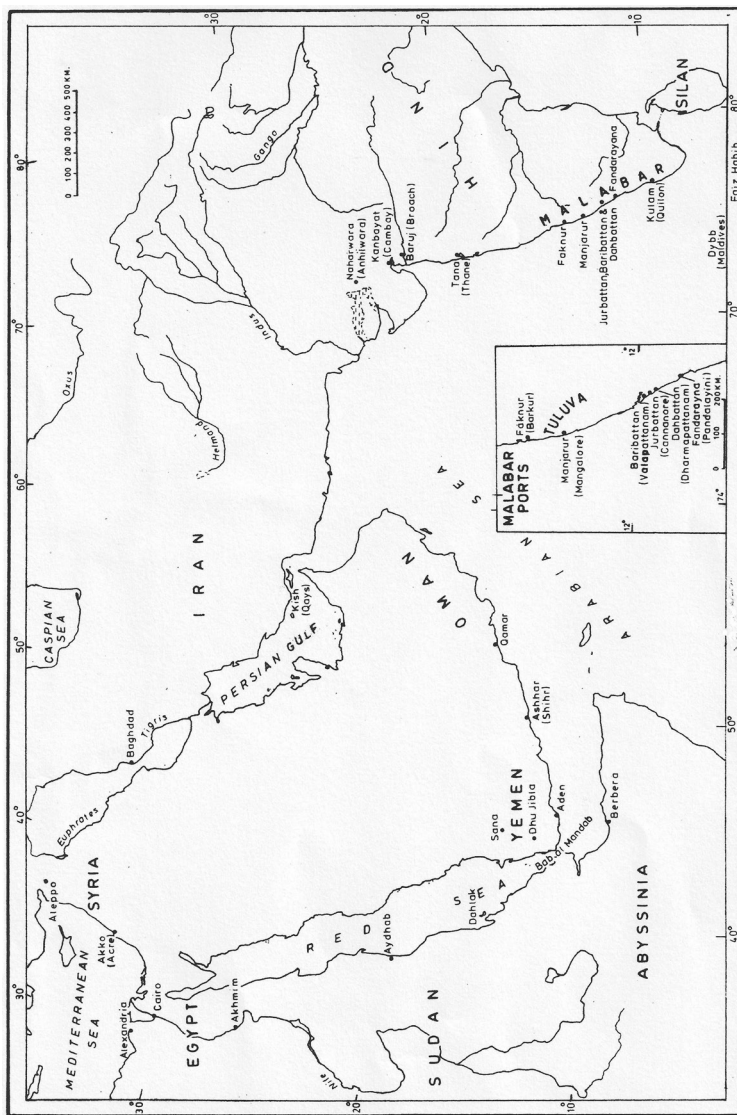
<sup>29</sup> Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, p. 384 (n. to p. 278).

<sup>30</sup> *India Book*, 612.

<sup>31</sup> The coastal voyages from northern Malabar to the Gujarat port of Barus or Broach (obviously passing along the Konkan coast) figures in a letter of 1145; *India Book*, pp. 476–78; also see Ranabir Chakravarti, 'Coastal Trade and Voyages in Konkan: The Early Medieval Scenario', *The Indian and Social History Review (IESHR)*, XXXV, 1998, 97–124.



**Figure 1**  
The commercial world of the 'India Book'



Source: Drawn by Faiz Habib.

consignments of pepper reached Aden: for example, in the ships of *nākhudā* Abu'l Kataib, Ramisht, al-Fawfali and Fatanswami.

There are invariably accounts of loss of cargoes of pepper because of shipwrecks. Around 1138, Khalaf b. Isaac reported to ben Yiju:

As to your shipment, my master, forwarded from Fandaryana in the ship of Fatanswami....The smaller ship arrived and I took delivery of the 1/38 bahar of pepper, as had been stated in your memorandum, to my master, the most illustrious Sheikh Madmun...The larger ship, however, arrived near Berbera, when its captain ran into trouble with it, until it was thrust against Bab-el-Mandeb, where it foundered. The pepper was a total loss. God salvaged none of it... I regret very much your losses.<sup>32</sup>

About a decade later, 1148–49, Abraham ben Yiju had once again to withstand the sad news of a ship-wreck leading to the loss of his shipment of iron and pepper.<sup>33</sup>

One also comes across some information regarding trade in cinnamon, another fragrant spice. Writing to Abu Zikri Cohen in Egypt, Madmun stated that 60 bags of Seli (Sri Lankan) cinnamon, each weighing 100 pounds, with a total weight of 20 *bahars*, were sent out from Aden to Egypt.<sup>34</sup> The Seli cinnamon appears to have reached Aden either directly from Sri Lanka and/or via Malabar.

Camphor was not native to India and brought to India from Southeast Asia, especially from Barus in the northern part of Sumatra. The involvement of several Jewish India traders in the supply of the camphor re-exported export from India to the Red Sea zone, including Aden and Egypt, becomes evident from the *geniza* papers.<sup>35</sup> The late thirteenth century account of Aden by Ibn al Mujawir informs us that the port authorities at Aden used to levy a duty on camphor (*kāfir*—the term was obviously derived from Sanskrit *karpura*, denoting camphor).<sup>36</sup>

Another forest product exported from India was lac. Joseph Lebdi at the turn of the eleventh century is found to have travelled between Nahrwara (Anhilwara) and Aden with an impressive consignment of 80 bales of lac.<sup>37</sup> As the letter mentions the arrival of the lac at the Red Sea port of Aydhab, the lac obviously was meant for Egyptian/Mediterranean markets.

It is no surprise that the Jewish merchants often handled maritime trade in Indian textiles which were staple export commodities. Fairly common is the mention of a red variety of cloth, named *lalas/lanas* in our letters, apparently an expensive

<sup>32</sup> *India Book*, pp. 599–600.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 589–90.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 375–76.

<sup>35</sup> In 'Aroma across the Sea: the Trade in Camphor in India and beyond' (in press), I discuss the demand of camphor in India and also in Aden and the Red Sea area.

<sup>36</sup> Chakravarti, 'Merchants, Merchandise and Merchantmen', p. 87.

<sup>37</sup> *India Book*, pp. 237–38.



article. At least once a Kulami *lalas* figures in one letter of 1135,<sup>38</sup> implying its manufacture at or shipment from Kulam (also known as Kulam Mali), or Quilon. Another fabric is called *Qassi* robes.<sup>39</sup> One may venture here to guess whether the *Qassi* cloth was made in or shipped out from Kutch (spelt as *Qassa* in Arabic).

We may now turn our attention to the regular shipping of a variety of iron from Malabar to Aden, occurring regularly in *geniza* records. In fact, it is only the *geniza* papers that speak of this trade in Indian iron. A letter from Madmun to ben Yiju in Malabar (c. 1130s) reads:

As for iron, this year it sold (well) in Aden—all kinds of iron—and in the coming year there will also be a good market, because there is none left in the city. Please take notice of this.<sup>40</sup>

Madmun thus clearly asks ben Yiju to prepare for a fresh supply of iron from Malabar in the next year, in view of its sustained demand in Aden. Madmun indeed urged ben Yiju to arrange for the shipment of iron, among other items, to Aden ‘on the first boat which sails from India’. Five varieties of iron appear in different *geniza* letters: (a) *bayd*, iron ingot, literally ‘eggs’; (b) *muhdahth*, refurbished iron; (c) *rasmi*, regular or standard iron; (d) *raqas*, shiny iron; and (e) *amlas* or smooth iron.<sup>41</sup> To this should be added the Kufi iron, already mentioned. Madmun conveyed the message to ben Yiju that refurbished iron fetched the price of 20 *dinārs* per *bahar*; that the *raqas* variety of iron was completely exhausted, obviously implying its great demand in Aden, and urged that any ship sailing from Manjarur (Mangalore) must bring iron to Aden.<sup>42</sup> A letter from Madmun, dated between 1133 and 1140, lodged a complaint with ben Yiju that the promised consignment of 21 *bahars* of refurbished iron was not fully delivered. He received only 17 *bahars*:

The banyan whom you asked to take charge of the iron, had delivered no more than this to him, saying that the rest of the iron was in the highlands and had not yet arrived.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the disappointment and impatience of Madmun at not having the expected amount of imported iron from India, the letter touches on the role of the Indian merchant (the *banyan*) who procured the iron from the interior (the highlands: does it mean the Nilgiris and/or the plateau of Karnataka?). The crucial linkages with the interior were an integral element of the seafaring activities of the time.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 373–74.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 315–16.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 315–16; and p. 315 *n*.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 316–17.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

Arabic and Persian texts occasionally refer to the excellence of Indian iron for the manufacturing of Damascus swords. It appears that the different varieties of iron in the *geniza* papers were not finished iron products, but iron sent as raw material to the West for further manufacturing and finishing. If we encounter in one letter the shipment of 15 *bahars* of standard iron by ben Yiju,<sup>44</sup> another document speaks of the transportation of refurbished iron in Abu'l Kataib's ship to Aden.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly enough, Khalaf b. Isaac sent out a request to ben Yiju not to send standard, shiny or refurbished iron, but only smooth iron, since other varieties rusted quickly and were therefore of little use.<sup>46</sup> The importance of Indian iron is also underlined in a letter of 1138/39, already mentioned, recording a shipwreck near Aden; the ill-fated ship carried both iron and pepper. Not a grain of pepper could be salvaged, but some iron was recovered by employing professional Adeni divers. The letter also informed ben Yiju that the actual charges towards the employment of divers for salvaging the iron would have to be debited to ben Yiju's account.<sup>47</sup>

Among the imports to India figure varieties of coins of precious metals, gold coins particularly—both the Adenese Maliki *dīnār* and the Egyptian *dīnār*. The latter fetched higher value than the Maliki *dīnār*. Amidst the very detailed accounts submitted to ben Yiju by Madmun in a letter of 1133, one reads that

I (Madmun) sent to you with Sheikh Abu Sa'id b. Mahfuz, in the ship *al-Mubarak*, to Mangalore—100 Egyptian mithqals, worth 253 *dīnārs*, and also with him 260 Zabti *dīnārs*, matching Maliki *dīnārs* in weight.<sup>48</sup>

The conversion rate between the Egyptian *mithqal* and the Adenese *dīnār* is clearly visible here. Twelve years down the line (1145) Madmun once again sent to Yiju with the ship-master (*nākhudā*) Jawhar al-Muqaddami, a purse in which were 18 Maliki *dīnārs* and another in which were 145 Maliki *dīnārs*.<sup>49</sup>

These are only a few samples of the many instances of the regular supply of gold coins to India by the India traders. Interestingly enough, one particular letter informs us of the despatch of silk instead of gold, as there was very specific information at Aden that silk was selling well in Malabar.<sup>50</sup> First, this may suggest that gold coins were brought as an imported commodity to India; second, an alternative to imported gold coin, at least in this instance, was silk which here assumed the role of currency. No less striking is the awareness of the prevailing market conditions

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 370–71.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 597.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 611–12.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 599–601.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 333.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 603.

in Malabar, known even to someone stationed in Aden. Khalaf b. Isaac wrote from Aden to ben Yiju in 1140:

Making a bold demand on your kindness, I sent five manns of silk... I was forced to do so, because of the devaluation of the Maliki (*dīnār*) and by chance I had no *mithqals*, the price of which is higher even than in the last year. Please, my master, just sell it for whatever God, the Exalted, apportions.<sup>51</sup>

Silver too could be an article of import. Once Madmun wrote of its unavailability at Aden:

As for what you [ben Yiju] mentioned (to buy) silver for the value of pepper, but nothing has been heard about buying silver from the proceeds of pepper; nothing prevented me (from buying) the silver, except that it was very expensive—five *dirhems* (weight) (of silver costing x *dīnār*); I did not dare to buy you this at that price.<sup>52</sup>

Ben Yiju, nevertheless, seems to have been quite interested in buying silver, in fact with the help of Madmun himself. Madmun informed him in a letter of 1134 that two packages of silver, weighing 605 *dirhems* and costing 124 *dīnārs*, were being carried to ben Yiju by Saydan b. Abu'l Fath.<sup>53</sup>

In the *geniza* letters sent to Abraham ben Yiju we frequently hear about the shipping of copper from Aden. Copper was needed by ben Yiju because he ran a bronze factory at al Manjarur for nearly two decades (1132 to 1149).<sup>54</sup> Madmun, for instance, sent out a *bahar* and a half copper costing 102 *dīnārs*; it was carried by *nākhudā* Ahmad b. Bakhtiyar for ben Yiju in the ship of Ramisht, a very famous and rich Sirafi ship-owner. It is true, however, that in the *geniza* papers the list of exports from India is more impressive than the imported items. The Jewish India traders did not participate, like the Arab and Persian merchants, in the import trade of horses to India.<sup>55</sup>

Beyond the commodities of export and import, the *geniza* documents also tell us of presents being sent to India. The description of gifts and presents should be situated in the intermingling of formality and informality, the official and the private, in correspondence among merchants. The sending of gifts and presents is

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 611.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 355.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 52–88, for an overview of Ben Yiju's activities; also Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* pp. 135–59, 223–49.

<sup>55</sup> On the import of quality horses to India, especially by overseas transportation, see Simon Digby, *War Horses and Elephants under the Delhi Sultanate*, Oxford, 1971, *passim*; also Ranabir Chakravarti, 'Equestrian Demands and Dealers: South Asian Scenario up to c. 1300', in *Horses in Asia: History, Trade and Culture*, eds B. Fagner, R. Ptak, A. Schottenhammer and R. Kauz, Vienna: 2009, pp. 145–60.

usually referred to by the sender at the very end of the letter and very politely. To ben Yiju thus regularly reached sheets of quality paper from Egypt as gift-items. Sometime between 1134 and 1137 and then again in 1148–49 Joseph Abraham gifted to ben Yiju respectively 5 sheets (*dast*) of Egyptian paper and 12 sheets of excellent Tahli papers which were to be delivered to the recipient by *nākhudā* Mahruz who was travelling from Aden to Malabar in Madmun's ship.<sup>56</sup> Abraham ben Yiju needed paper, then a rarity in India, not merely for keeping his business accounts and writing letters, but also for writing poetry in his fine hand. Among other presents there occasionally also came to ben Yiju soap and fine scarves from Egypt.<sup>57</sup>

### III

The long-distance commerce, especially the investments and the inescapable risks involved in the sea-borne trade, made the system of partnership a salient feature of the operations of Jewish India traders. A typical case in point is the partnership or *commenda* between the well-known India trader Joseph Lebdi and his working partner Khalluf during the closing years of the 11th century. The partnership was made specifically for trade with Yemen, India and Maghreb and was of the value of 460 *dīnārs*, with the agreement that Lebdi would get three-fourths of the profit and Khalluf the rest.<sup>58</sup> The likely reason of this disproportionate sharing of profit between the two is that Khalluf probably did not make a major investment in this venture and therefore, was entitled to only a quarter of the profit.

Madmun's partnership with Bilal b. Jarir, the powerful Sultan of Aden, appears in a letter from Madmun to Abu Zikri Kohen (1140s). He entered into this partnership to build and outfit a ship that would ply on the Aden–Sri Lanka route. As ship-building was a very costly venture, this partnership was almost inevitable. The same letter further informs us of Madmun's second partnership with Bilal for trade in 60 bales of lac, weighing 100 *bahars* (30,000 pounds), 100 pieces of *Qassi* robes and eight bales of pepper.<sup>59</sup> As the pepper was earmarked for sale at Aydhab and also because Madmun wrote this letter to Abu Zikri at Fustat, we may argue that this *commenda* was meant for maritime trade from Aden to Egypt. Thus Madmun's partnerships with Bilal covered both the Aden–India and the Aden–Egypt sectors.

<sup>56</sup> *India Book*, pp. 562, 567, 590.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 567, 590.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 373–74. The ship in which Madmun invested jointly with Bilal b. Jarir seems to have been operational on the Aden–Sri Lanka route for nearly two decades. Ranabir Chakravarti, 'Ships, Sea-farings and Ship-owners: India and the Indian Ocean (700–1500)', in *Ships and the Development of Maritime Technology in the Indian Ocean*, eds David Parkin and Ruth Barnes, London, 2002, pp. 28–61.

Madmun's business dealings in India very often involved Abraham ben Yiju, though he was not his formal partner. The vast business networks of Madmun necessitated the use of a store room in Aden. More interestingly, his trading activities and affairs in India were managed by *nākhudā* Ali al-Fawfali, the betel-nut dealer turned ship-owner.<sup>60</sup>

#### IV

Even with all arrangements in place, things often did not go well with merchants. Madmun confided in a letter to ben Yiju (dated either 1136–38 or 1145–49) that Bilal, the Sultan of Aden and Madmun's business partner, had developed the habit of demanding the first pick of goods brought to Aden.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, Adenese merchants were unhappy about the operations that Bilal and Madmun undertook jointly.<sup>62</sup> The *geniza* papers do not regularly talk about the political scenario. However, both Madmun and Isaac b. Khalaf wrote to ben Yiju around 1135 two separate eye-witness accounts of a naval raid on Aden by the rapacious Sultan of Kish/Qays (an island in the Persian Gulf). The raid, however, was aborted and after a lull of two months business became as usual at Aden, as the two letters tell us.<sup>63</sup>

#### V

Personal relations could also sour among merchants. In 1141 Nahray b. Allan, a front-ranking India trader, wrote a detailed letter to Arus, his uncle and father-in-law, regarding his several successful crossings of the Arabian Sea between Aden and Malabar and his profitable business ventures. Along with this business report he barely hid his frustration and anger with a frivolous junior merchant who enjoyed prostitutes' company and the association of a wine-serving boy at Lakhaba (close to Aden).<sup>64</sup>

Another India trader came from Fustat to India via Aden and regularly travelled on the Aden–Malabar route. But he was perhaps not adequately successful and hence could not go back home with his rather meagre earning. When two years

<sup>60</sup> *India Book*, pp. 350–51.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 357–58.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 341–42, 446–47. Also see, S.D. Goitein, 'Two Eye Witness Reports on an Expedition of the King of Kish (Qays) against Aden', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XVI, 1954, pp. 247–57. A recent analysis of this raid, viewed as an example of conflictual situations in the Indian Ocean prior to 1500, is offered by Roxani Eleni Margariti, 'Mercantile Networks, Port Cities and "Pirate" States: Conflict and Competition in the Indian Ocean World of Trade before the Sixteenth Century', *JESHO*, 2008, pp. 543–77.

<sup>64</sup> Goitein, *Letters*, chapter 5, letter no. 11.

elapsed and still uncertainty prevailed about his return to Fustat, his wife in utter frustration probably contemplated divorce. To this he wrote in reply:

Now if this is your wish, I cannot blame you. For the waiting has been long. And, I do not know whether the Creator will grant relief so that I can come home, or whether matters will take time, for I cannot come home with nothing...Now the matter is in your hand. If you wish separation from me, accept the bill of repudiation and you are free. But if this is not your decision and not your desire, do not lose these long years of waiting: perhaps, relief is at hand and you will regret at a time when regret will be of no avail.<sup>65</sup>

The *geniza* documents thus offer us rare insights into the social and cultural situations of individual merchants and their concerns and anxieties, especially when they went to far-off lands, leaving their families behind. In the papers, related to Abraham ben Yiju, also frequently figures his slave-cum-business agent Bama, who, as Ghosh rightly suggested, was a local Tulu person, possibly named Bommi or Bommai. In order to look after his master's business ventures, he travelled to Egypt and Aden and interacted closely with many other India traders, including Madmun. These India traders in their correspondence with ben Yiju often conveyed their good wishes and greetings to 'brother Bama' and 'Sheikh Bama'. That for his living expenses in Aden he borrowed money to the tune of 8 *dīnārs* for four months out of the accounts of ben Yiju is reported in a letter by Madmun who also once complained to ben Yiju that Bama came to Madmun's office in a drunken state.<sup>66</sup> This kind of intimate image not only of important merchants, but also of a slave agent, make the *geniza* papers uniquely useful for the study of social aspects of the maritime trade history of India, beyond transactions of commodities, markets and prices. The other striking feature is the remarkable cultural plurality observed and maintained by Jewish, Muslim and Indian merchants, among whom little religious intolerance is recorded. In a letter of 1145, the India trader Judah ha Kohen assured his brother-in-law Mahruz, who was attacked by pirates near Thana, that he could seek any financial assistance from the Hindu ship-owner Tinbu, because between Kohen and Tinbu existed 'inseparable bonds of friendship and brotherhood'.<sup>67</sup> What we have offered in the foregoing pages is far from a comprehensive portrayal of the India traders and their linkages with India; at the most, the article has been able to present only a few glimpses of the problems associated with the activities of maritime merchants in the western Indian Ocean prior to AD 1500.

<sup>65</sup> Goitein, *Letters*, pp. 220–26; quotation on p. 225.

<sup>66</sup> Amitav Ghosh, 'The Slave of MS. 6', *Subaltern Studies*, VII, 1992, pp. 159–220.

<sup>67</sup> Goitein, *Letters*, p. 64.